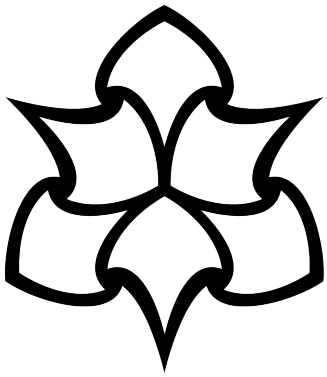

The childcatchers: Social work in film and television

The childcatchers: an exploration of the representations and discourses of social work in UK film and television drama from the 1960s to the present day.

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Abstract

Summary

This article reports on research undertaken to critically examine portrayals, representations and discourses of social work and social workers in UK film and television drama from the 1960s to the present day. The research analysed four film and television dramas where social work and social workers were featured: *Cathy Come Home* (1966), *Ladybird Ladybird* (1994), *Happy Go Lucky* (2008) and *Oranges and Sunshine* (2010). The research aimed to better understand portrayals and representations of social work and social workers in UK film and television drama; inform and develop understanding of contemporary narratives and discourses about social work and contribute to debates about the purpose and future of social work.

Findings

Portrayals and representations in UK film and television drama often encourage and reinforce an overly simplistic, hostile and negative impression of social work which is presented as predominantly focused on child protection and the removal of children from families. Social workers are typically characterised as incompetent, bureaucratic, well-meaning but misguided (Freeman & Valentine, 2004; Siporin,1984). This potentially endorses neo-liberal ideologies and discourses about welfare, welfare recipients, welfare provision and social service.

Applications

This topic and approach offers an accessible and interesting platform for research, teaching and policy development and from which to critically inform debates about the future and purpose of social work and welfare in the UK.

Keywords: social work, portrayals, representation, film, television, drama, childcatcher

The childcatchers: An exploration of representations and discourses of social work in UK film and television drama from the 1960s to the present day.

Surveys and commentaries on public perceptions of social work in the UK have consistently evidenced the periodically difficult relationship between social work, the media and the public (Aldridge, 1994; Tickle, 2012). Although social work has been described as society's safety net (Moynihan, 2012), social workers are: 'routinely vilified in sections of the national press' (Brody, 2009, "*Social workers deserve better treatment*") as well as being principally targeted as culpable for welfare system failures (Parton, 2011).

Each year it is estimated there are between 50-100 child deaths from abuse or neglect (Department for Education & Skills [DfES], 2004). Pritchard et al. (2012) suggest child protection policy in the UK has been largely driven by such high-profile tragedies and blaming of child protection services by media and politicians. In turn, this has impacted on public confidence in social work, the recognition and standing of the profession and on staff recruitment, morale and retention (Department for Education [DfE], 2011). Parton (2011) argues that correctly child protection remains a significant public, political and policy concern but that also represents an opportunity having generated a renewed interest in social work. Annie Hudson, who recently took up her new post of Chief Executive of The College of Social Work in August 2013, has stated that she believes the general public perception of social work can be changed through media, film and television and that the educational role

of the College in supporting this change will be one of her top priorities (Community Care, 2013, "College chief: Social work is an alien and unknown world for many").

This article argues that portrayals of social work through film and television drama, largely focus on child protection and serve to encourage and reinforce an increasingly hostile and negative impression of social work as well as endorse particular neo liberal ideologies and discourses about welfare and social work in England (Carey & Foster, 2012; Garrett, 2012). They can also be seen to reflect negative attitudes to service users and those in need (Valentine & Freeman, 2004). In international film and television, social work has historically been less negatively defined within dramatic texts, but this can now be seen to be changing in response to increasingly contested transnational debates and discourses about welfare, welfare provision, poverty and need (Ciriano, Edmondson & King, 2013).

Dramatic depictions and representations of social work can offer a genuine opportunity to explore not only ideas of social work and social workers in the twenty-first century but also serve to prompt a wider debate about social work. This debate is not merely about re-imaging social work, as suggested in recent UK social work reform (Social Work Reform Board [SWRB], 2010), but we would argue more challengingly and importantly offers an opportunity to re-imagine and debate the purpose of social work.

Social work in UK film and television

Social workers are becoming an increasing presence in UK film and television drama. Frequently such portrayals focus on child protection issues, typically leading to the removal

of children from families and interference in and disruption of families and family life. A recent and notable high profile example of this was a storyline on the UK soap-opera, *EastEnders*, first broadcast in October 2012, which featured, 'teenage mum Lola and her baby, Lexi, who had just been taken into temporary care by her concerned social worker' (BBC, 2012, "*EastEnders' Social Work Storyline*").

The BBC plot had received a negative reaction from social workers, objecting to procedural inaccuracy and misrepresentation in the storyline. Bridget Robb, acting chief of the British Association of Social Workers (the main professional body representing social work in the UK), criticised the BBC's 'shabby' portrayal of an entire profession' and accused the BBC of 'deliberately spreading misinformation about the child protection process' arguing that such portrayals of social work are based on poor research and were a misleading representation of the interaction between the profession and the people they work with (Greenslade, 2012, "*Social workers outrage.*"). It is pertinent to the discussion within this article, that this episode prompted debates about social work on online viewer forums such as *DigitalSpy* reflecting differing public responses. These ranged from 'social workers aren't all bad and the storyline was not fair' (DigitalSpy, 2012, "*BASW complains about EE*" thread) to views which were not only negative but reflected the sort of language found in cyber hate crime (Community Care, 2012).

A particularly strong theme arising out of this research has been the association of social work and social workers exclusively with the role of 'childsnatcher' and 'childcatcher.' Within film, the term 'child-catcher' can be traced to *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968) and the introduction of the 'Childcatcher' as a supporting character in the film scripted by Roald

Dahl and Ken Hughes (from the novel written by Ian Fleming in 1964). In the story, The Childcatcher drove a carriage around the streets of the fictional kingdom of Vulgaria snatching children away from their families.

Social work, purpose, reform and change

Martin Davies has argued that although UK social work and social workers have had recognisably differing roles during the last 100 years these can be 'all subsumed under a general theory of *maintenance*' (Davies, 1994, p. 57). Davies critiques social work as ultimately accepting of both the basic structure of society and also of social work as a compliant profession that has largely accepted the imposed limits to its role and function. Within this maintenance model, varying beliefs and attitudes to social welfare and the purpose of welfare services, can be identified which are also identifiable in social work narratives in film and television: ideas about 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor; a belief in the existence of a set of clear and definable religious and secular codes of morality and behaviour that should be used to inform and instruct individual lifestyles and family life and the rejection of state-based welfare (Lymbery, 2005).

Concerns have been raised around the legitimacy and future of social work in the face of drives to further marginalise and exclude radical and empowering models of social work and locate it within tightly prescribed legislative and administrative roles of assessment, record keeping and bureaucracy (Ferguson & Woodward, 2009; Jordan, 2004, 2006). Whilst these differing perspectives and views about social work's history, purpose and role are still part of a broader ongoing debate about the future of social work, manifestations of each can

often be found in film and television drama featuring social work and social workers. Thus, social work in film and television can be interpreted and understood as a product not only of its history, but also of the prevailing political, social and economic philosophies of its time (Asquith et al., 2005; Edmondson, 2013).

The Social Work Task Force, launched in 2009, was charged to improve frontline practice and management (Department of Children, Schools and Families [DCFS] & Department of Health [DH], 2010). The Task Force, reinforced by Eileen Munro's review of child protection (DfE, 2011, 2012), identified several key issues faced by childrens services and the social work profession. Particular attention was drawn to the organisational difficulties social workers face in their day-to-day work, notably in relation to over bureaucratisation of child protection processes and procedures, inadequate leadership and management and too little professional development and support, particularly for recently qualified social workers. These conclusions help us understand part of the operational context of social work practice and as we will show are often reflected in film and television portrayals of social work, past and present.

The literature relating to representation of social work in film and television

It is apparent that the majority of writing on social work in film and television so far originates in the United States. UK literature on social work has been more limited and the emphasis has been on representation of social workers and social care in print media with a particular emphasis on high profile child protection cases, systems failures and tragedies.

Valentine and Freeman (2002) analysed a series of films produced in the United States between 1938 and 1999 and found that representation was typically female, predominantly white and engaged in 'women's work', a finding consistent with Murdach's later study (2006). These findings also placed a strong emphasis on clerical and administrative tasks and actions designed to maintain the status quo. Social control and a victim blaming approach were identified as key themes. Evidence of social workers being involved in social education, mediation, research and policy making were absent (Valentine & Freeman, 2002). A further study by Freeman and Valentine (2004) developed this argument, concluding that negative representations of social work can be seen as an intentional response to social works professional mission to foster well-being and to support the vulnerable and oppressed . They argue that this locates social work at the interface between 'private ills' and 'public troubles' (Freeman & Valentine, 2004, p.161), in a place where challenges to existing power relations and disruption of the status quo are off limits to filmic representations of social work. This is consistent with Aldridge's (1990, 1994) analysis of social work in UK print media, in which she concludes that a capitalist press in a consumer society is unlikely to endorse social work, that social work as a day-to-day activity is relatively mundane and not of interest to the national press and will, instead and inevitably tend to report and emphasise 'bad news' around the profession. Galilee's (2005) study of UK print media drew similar conclusions with social workers emerging as modern day 'folk devils' (Cohen, 1972). Reid and Misener in comparing print media in the United States and UK, concluded that 'social work has a serious image problem in the UK' (2001, p.92).

In a more recent study, Henderson and Franklin (2007) examined portrayals of the wider social care workforce in popular UK dramas. They argue that television is often overlooked as

a source of representation of social care professionals and as a site through which to examine the impact this can have on public perceptions. Linked to this, Buckingham (1996) sees the UK soap opera as an important source for the examination of social issues because if its emphasis on the family and everyday life. In contrast to previous studies, Henderson and Franklin (2007) found that social care professionals represented in their selected UK dramas were predominantly male; there was an emphasis on 'helping' but characters were often peripheral to the main plot, located within bureaucratic structures with an emphasis on 'rationality' as opposed to the 'emotionality' of their clientele (Henderson & Franklin, 2007, p.146). In addition, despite the ongoing narratives within soap operas, which offer the opportunity to develop complex characters, social care professionals typically had a specific, limited role often being used as a device to shift a plot in a particular direction.

Research design

Method

The research utilised a qualitative research approach combining documentary/visual research methods. The research set out to:

- explore and better understand portrayals and representations of social work in UK film and television drama;
- inform and develop our understanding of contemporary narratives and discourses about social work;
- contribute to contemporary debates about the value, nature, purpose and future of social work, particularly in the context of ongoing social work reforms in England.

A purposive sampling strategy was used in the research (Mathews and Ross, 2010; Walliman, 2006), both to select films and television programmes for the research (see below for details of the sources) and additionally to recruit a small focus group to watch and discuss selected portrayals and representations. The focus group is conceptualised within this study as a small scale case-study with data gathered from the group integrated into analysis of the source texts and discussion of findings

The methodological approach adopted for this research featured an initial stage of data collection and analysis, led by the researchers – which is the point at which most of the previous published research and commentaries in this area have tended to stop– and took this a stage forward by seeking out the views and reflections of a group with an experiential connection to social work, in this case six experienced social workers working in the field of children and families.. Yin (2009) describes a well-crafted case study approach as containing elements of description, exploration and explanation with learning from cases being intrinsically valuable in theory building (Firestone, 1993; Yin, 2004, 2009). Stake (1995, 1998) argues that a goal of case study work should be production of intuitive and naturalistic conclusions which resonate with the experiences of the participants and audience. This approach adds extra layers of analysis and rigour and also gives a 'real' dimension to the research by drawing directly on the unique views, reflections and reflexions of individuals and groups who can be acknowledged as 'experts' with regard to their particular experiences of social work. It also offers the opportunity to use the lens of film and television fiction as not only a 'window on the world', but also as a mirror for reflection on and wider discussion about how the different 'actors' are characterised in film and television and how social work in particular is portrayed and represented.

The methodology and analysis was informed by documentary analysis (May, 2003), visual analysis (Prosser, 1998); analysis of the focus group interview took place using textual analysis within discourse analysis within a framework suggested by van Dijk (1993), Fairclough (1995), and McKee (2003). Work on representation (Dyer, 1993; Foucault, 1972; Hall, 1997), stigma (Goffman 1967) and identity (Gripsrud, 2002) also formed part of the theoretical framework. Discourses emerging from the focus group interview were identified using a three-part coding system as suggested by Langdridge (2004).

Theoretical framework of the research

This research is grounded in questions about social work and social change with a particular focus on the relationship between the past and the present as suggested by the Popular Memory Group (1982). The group argues that there is a link between knowledge and change, a process through which a challenge to existing ideas and formulation of new ones occurs, invoking Foucault's (1980) notion of the history of the present. May (2003) sees documentary research as a way in which the chronicling of past events can lead to an understanding of the values, attitudes and the social and cultural climate of a particular period. His conceptualisation of research as a 'reflexive endeavour' (May 2003, p. 27) also forms part of the theoretical framework of the study, with a focus on the excavation of texts in order to discover knowledge about a particular period (McKee, 2003) and qualitative interviewing as a way of excavating private memories (Popular Memory Group, 1982). The study is also rooted in a body of literature on representation, and the use of documentary trigger material as part of the qualitative interview process allowed participants to consider the notion of representation as

defined by Hall as 'the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning.' (1997, p. 61).

There are a number of debates about how the media represents or re-presents reality and a number of theories drawn from the disciplines of psychology, linguistics and media and cultural studies, which seek to explain the relationship between the mass media and society. The representation of different groups or issues has become a key focus of study for scholars of media and cultural studies (Gripsrud, 2002; Hall, 1997). The question of whether the media reflects or constructs reality is central to the debate on representations. Branston and Stafford (1996, p.78), for example, claim that the 'reality' represented in the media is: 'always a construction, never a transparent window,' while Kellner(1995) argues that within media culture existing social struggles are reproduced and that this has a key impact on the production of identities and the ways in which people make sense of the world.

Foucault's concept of discourse, as 'a group of statements which provide a language for talking about a particular topic at a particular historical moment' (Hall, 1997, p. 291), links language and practice. Discourse defines what and how things are talked about, influences ideas and is used to regulate, ruling in and ruling out different ways of talking about ourselves, the world and relations between groups (Hall, 1997). The concept of discursive formations refers to the way in which different statements, texts or actions come together. Foucault (1972) argues that knowledge and meaning are produced through these discursive formations. This is a key concept when analysing media texts.

Foucault (1972, 1973, 1977), argues discourse is influential in producing social policy and regulation within society. Foucault also advanced the contentious notion that there is no historical continuity in the way that discourses operate. Dyer (1993) asserts a direct link between representation and reality, especially in relation to minority groups and is clear in his belief that the media' representation of groups in particular ways has an impact on public perception and social policy. There is a growing body of work which similarly looks at the way the media influences policy through its representation of key health and social issues (King & Street, 2005).

Films and extracts used for analysis

The four film and television dramas used in this research were: *Cathy Come Home* (1966); *Ladybird Ladybird* (1994); *Happy Go Lucky* (2008) and *Oranges and Sunshine* (2010). The four film and television dramas and extracts were sampled using the following criteria: social workers feature significantly in the storyline and are not merely used as *deus ex machina* (plot devices); the films (released between 1966 and 2010) offer particular historical perspectives on the development and delivery of social work and social welfare in the late 20th and into the early 21st century. Each film was viewed several times by the researchers in order to become closely acquainted with the texts. The focus group was provided with a brief synopsis of each film, of the selected extract to be viewed and the historical context of the films (locating the era of the film in line with the development of social work).

The group was shown four main extracts. The films and extracts used are described below.

Extract One (from, *Cathy Come Home)* - Nine minutes duration.

Extract One is taken from *Cathy Come Home* (1996), a well-known UK text, directed by Ken Loach as part of the BBC's Wednesday Play anthology season. Screened in 1966, it tells the story of Cathy and Reg who have three children. Reg loses his job which leads the family into poverty and soon to become homeless. The couple become separated. Eventually Cathy is evicted from her homeless female-only, family accommodation. The extract viewed features Cathy being interviewed by welfare officers before being told she is to be evicted. The final scene shows Cathy and her children on a railway station platform and ends with the children being forcibly removed from Cathy by welfare officers. Cathy is left alone, weeping over the loss of her children.

Based on a docu-drama format and linked to early kitchen-sink dramas in terms of style and production (Zarhy- Levo, 2010) *Cathy Come Home* highlighted the issue of homelessness and attitudes to homeless and destitute families (Pagett, 1999; Sandbrook, 2006). Services depicted in the drama pre-date the establishment of local authority social service departments in England.

Extract Two (from, *Ladybird Ladybird*) – Seven minutes duration

Ladybird Ladybird (1994), again directed by Ken Loach, is a feature film depicting a families deteriorating relationship with a local authority social services department. Loach revisits UK welfare provision almost thirty years after *Cathy Come Home*. This drama features Maggie who has four children and comes to the attention of Social Services when they are injured in a fire. Maggie was found to be an "unfit mother" and her children were removed from her care. Maggie meets Jorge and they start a family together but struggle to

remain together. Toward the end of the drama, Social Services remove their newly born child.

The extract shows Maggie during a meeting with two social workers at a homeless family hostel . She forcefully tells them to give her son back to her and to leave her alone. She is told by Social Services that if she does not co-operate, then all of her children will be taken into care. Maggie leaves the hostel with her three children and returns to her former home, where Simon (her husband) is still living. The next day, Maggie and Simon leave in a van as a social worker visits the family. The worker warns Maggie that she could lose all of her children forever. Simon and Maggie drive off in their van, but get into an argument. Simon assaults Maggie and throws her to the ground.

Extract Three (from, *Happy Go Lucky*) - Six minutes duration

Happy Go Lucky (2008) is a film directed by Mike Leigh. It was chosen for its portrayal of a young male social worker (Tim). Poppy is a primary school teacher and observes one of her pupils bullying one of his classmates. This is reported and a social worker, Tim, visits the school to meet the boy. It emerges that the boys' mother has been beating him. The film offers the opportunity to see social work in a contemporary context and the portrayal of a social worker adopting a therapeutic approach. Unusually, in films featuring social workers, *Happy Go Lucky* shows Tim outside his normal work setting as he begins a relationship with Poppy.

Extract Four (from, *Oranges and Sunshine*) – One minute, thirty seconds duration.

Oranges and Sunshine (2010), directed by Jim Loach (son of Ken Loach), tells the true story of Margaret Humphreys, a social worker from Nottingham, who in the 1980s

uncovered the scandal of many thousands of UK children separated from their birth families, placed in the care system and illegally deported to Australia. Humphreys meets some of the children as they have grown into adulthood and begin to disclose stories of their neglect or sexual abuse in care in Australia. Humphreys, almost single-handedly, reunites many families and uncovers organised and systematic abuse over several decades.

The extract viewed is from the opening scene of the film. Humphreys is a local authority social worker and is seen arriving at a block of flats in Nottingham. The police are present with her as she negotiates the removal of a child from a young and distressed mother. Margaret is shown carrying the baby out of the flat.

Findings

The 'childcatcher'

All four films illustrate the representation of social workers as 'childcatchers' and the predominant activity of social work as the removal of children from families. When members of the focus group were asked directly what social workers were most seen doing in film and television, one respondent answered 'they nab people's children' whilst another, recalling a recent *Coronation Street* (a UK soap-opera) storyline, added 'it's much more exciting to see Becky having her kids taken off her' rather than, as she added, examine issues of child protection or welfare in depth. This observation is consistent with Henderson and Franklin's (2007) findings in their examination of social care professionals in television drama and in other work looking at social work and the media (Aldridge, 1994; Brody, 2009; Galilee, 2005). This contemporary construction in film and television, it can be argued, has served to reinforce twenty-first century portrayals of social work as the 'childcatcher'. The complexity of the

relationship between child, family and state (Horner, 2006) remains, it seems, largely unexplored in representational terms, as is any attempt to present social work in anything other than the context of child protection. Issues of poverty, need, structural inequality and discrimination are clearly present but are not at the forefront of storylines. Similarly, the evident presence of issues of risk and protection, of male-violence and the challenges and dilemmas of balancing effective risk management with humane social work practice (Broadhurst et al, 2010) are not typically taken up directly within the narratives.

Ken Loach's *Cathy Come Home* (1966) and *Ladybird Ladybird* (1994) feature scenes in which children are removed from families. The predominant representation in these texts is of the welfare workers and social workers as uncaring and callous. Even in *Oranges and Sunshine* (2010), a film with a more heroic depiction of a social worker uncovering injustice and child-abuse, the opening scene of the film establishes and affirms the link between social work and child protection. The camera follows the central character of social worker Margaret Humphreys in the process of removing a baby from her mother. This scene sets up a dilemma, later explored in the film in terms of social work, care and control. Social workers have clear responsibilities as agents of the state in relation to protecting children and in certain circumstances children may have to be removed from their family home for their own safety. However, later in the film, Humphreys also has to confront wrongdoing and injustice as she encounters adults forcibly separated from their birth families by welfare agencies and relocated to Australia (the land of "oranges and sunshine") only to be exploited and sexually abused.

A frequent theme in all the films and extracts viewed is the unequal power relationship between social workers and service users, particularly in relation to child protection and

statutory powers to remove children from families where they are in danger and may come to harm. In the focus group discussion, commenting on a scene from *Ladybird Ladybird* (1994) where the central character (Maggie) is meeting with two social workers, a respondent noted: 'I think at one point he said if you don't do this we'll have to take all your children into care.' *Ladybird Ladybird* (1994) and also *Oranges and Sunshine* (2010) are essentially films about power, misuse and abuse of power and the interface between and across public and private domains (Freeman & Valentine, 2004). Contemporary debates about social work reflect these same themes.

Signs of authority

The ways in which signs and signifiers of authority (Hall, 1997) operate within these texts formed another key theme of analysis. In Extract Two, from *Ladybird Ladybird* (1994), a social worker arrives at the temporary home of Maggie and her family just as they are fleeing from services in a campervan. One focus group respondent commented of the social worker, she looks like a vulture, she's dressed in black.' It is also noted by another group member that 'she's armed with a clipboard.' This was an interesting observation of the way in which signs of power and authority are reinforced in the social work characters in film. The formal bureaucracy of welfare in *Cathy Come Home* (1966) was easily recognisable in a number of scenes. Cathy's dealings with the smartly dressed, well-spoken, patronising representatives of the welfare state are dominated by the representation of bureaucratic procedures and strict formality. On viewing Extract One (from, *Cathy Come Home*), one focus group respondent noted, 'care proceedings, at risk register, every other word out of his mouth was some sort of grisly stick'. Dyer (1993) emphasises the power of language in establishing authority and

distinguishing between social groups. Similarly, signifiers such as briefcases, files and clipboards as seen in all the films and extracts can be interpreted as illustrating the power and authority of those holding information. The use of such signs also reflects attempts to portray professional social work as essentially a rational-technical activity which can be applied to problem solving (Parton, 2003). However, as Schön (1983, 1987) argues this position does not recognise the uncertainty and ambiguity of professional practice, and the complexity and dilemmas of social work and child protection work (Parton, 2011).

One-dimensional characterisation and public perceptions of social work

Siporin (1984) and Henderson and Franklin (2007) remark on the lack of complexity and absence of rounded representation of social work/care characters in film and television and this was apparent in the texts analysed. Even the appearance of a male social worker (Tim) in Mike Leigh's *Happy Go Lucky* (2008), chosen as a text which provided a rare glimpse of the non-work world of the social worker, prompted a debate in the focus group about procedural inaccuracies in his handling of an interview and the fact that he 'hit on' the school teacher at the end of the extract viewed. 'I think he's a good example of a bumbling idiot' was the conclusion of one respondent, despite the character having been identified as a positive alternative portrayal to that of 'childcatcher'. Having watched Extract Two (from, *Ladybird Ladybird,* 1994) one respondent in the group observed:

> 'But all those other people in these films are rounded, aren't they? Even the perpetrator there, even the guy who loses it, and he's obviously a violent guy,

> he's got a lovely warm side to him when they go home and he sees his children, so they're portrayed as rounded people, whereas the social workers are never portrayed as any sort of rounded personality at all. They're just the voice of authority.'

Tracy Beaker, a UK children's TV programme about a child in residential care (based on a series of novels by Jacqueline Wilson), was identified within the focus group as a more interesting portrayal of social work and welfare. There was a lengthy discussion about the positive representation of children in care and the child's perspective taken by the programme's writer. However, the group observed that Tracy's actual social worker is still represented in a negative way and characterised as a 'bumbling idiot.' Again, the group reflected on the lost opportunities, even within a programme that was generally positively viewed. The narrative function of the social worker as representative of welfare services is key to the plot of both *Cathy Come Home* (1966) and *Ladybird Ladybird* (1994). Although the audience gets to know something about the main characters in the film, by contrast the authority figures responsible for providing welfare are typically one dimensional. Welfare workers and social workers are identified as 'outsiders' rather than 'insiders' (Henderson & Franklin, 2007); often appearing as intrusive and questioning, and using bureaucratic and stilted language they seem to lack any personal life or emotional response within the dramas.

Representation as a window and mirror on social work practice

As previously noted, much of the debate around the mass media focuses on whether it

reflects or constructs reality, (Gripsrud, 2002; Hall, 1997; Kellner, 1995). An interesting development arising out of the focus groups discussions was that the group reflected on the wider media's portrayal and representation of social work and social workers and how this impacted on their own practice and viewed their role and job. The negative impact of media portrayals on practising social workers was one key theme that emerged, with one respondent stating: 'I think the portrayals in the media just fuel challenges to social workers.'

Representations of social work in film and television were seen to be particularly problematic across all the texts with social workers predominantly portrayed as inhumane or uncaring. In Extract One (from, *Cathy Come Home*, 1966), where the children are forcibly removed from Cathy and she is left alone in a railway station, the group commented on how the extracts made them reflect on their own interventions and communication with service users and carers. In this way, the extracts moved from not just offering a "window on the world" but also offered individuals the opportunity to reflect on the texts as a mirror (albeit distorted) of their own practice. It also facilitated recognition of the challenging emotional context of much of social work practice; the dilemmas and vulnerabilities of being a social worker. The value of this to teaching and developing reflective practice is noteworthy here.

Discussion

Viewing a series of film texts produced from the 1960's to the present day, provided the opportunity to reflect on past and present practice in the context of ideas about the relationship between the past and the present (Foucault, 1980; Popular Memory Group, 1982). In *Cathy*

Come Home (1966) a male welfare officer tells Cathy, 'once the children are gone we won't be interested in you'. It is interesting to reflect on this statement in the midst of current debates about the focus and future of the profession. The focus group concluded that, while the language may be less blunt or callous today, the political rhetoric of welfare and deserving/ undeserving can readily be found in contemporary debates about social work and welfare and mirrored in rational-technical presumptions about the future direction of social work.

The first aim of the research was the exploration of portrayals and representations of social work in UK film and television. A number of common themes emerged. The predominance of the 'childcatcher' model of social work and a lack of visibility of other aspects of social work emerged as a key feature of representation. The general negativity around the representation of social work was identified in the texts examined and this is consistent with other work looking at film and television (Freeman & Valentine, 2004; Greenslade, 2012; Henderson & Franklin, 2007; Valentine & Freeman, 2002) and the reporting of social work/social workers in the print media (Aldridge, 1990, 1994; Galilee, 2005; Tickle, 2012).

The way in which changes in social work policy and practise could be identified through the texts is something that the focus group paid particular attention in discussions and emerged in our analysis. Views on changes in social work between the 1960s and present day were identified and respondents were able to pinpoint a number of events/crises that had triggered this. These findings reiterate the value of the use of documentary research in making connections between the past and present (Popular Memory Group, 1982). This has relevance in relation to the second aim of the study, the presence of narratives and discourses around social work in contemporary UK drama. Having viewing the selected extracts, the respondents

also brought their own contemporary examples of social work portrayals into the discussion, drawing on recent examples from UK soaps (*EastEnders*; *Coronation Street*). Again, the 'childcatcher' model predominated and reinforces the position that in terms of the representation of social work, perhaps relatively little has changed in the since *Cathy Come Home* (1966) was first shown.

In considering the contribution of this research to contemporary debates about the value, nature, purpose and future of social work, it was clear that the negative discourses to be found at work in print media reporting of social work (Asquith et al. 2005; Galilee, 2005; Tickle, 2012) are also present in film and television representations. The film and television portrayals of social work and social workers examined in the texts were focused on child protection to the detriment of most other aspects of social work; offered a one-dimensional portrayal of social work characters, often bumbling or inhumane and often present as a plot device (*deus ex machina).* Accumulatively, all these features contributed to negative public perceptions of social work.

As previously discussed, Dyer (1993, p.1) has noted: 'how social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in life' and this is certainly something that emerged from our analysis of social work in film and television. It is also reflected in previous literature about social work and social care (Freeman & Valentine, 2004; Henderson & Franklin, 2007) and has significance given the closeness of the soap/audience relationship (Philo & Henderson, 1999).

Linked to this is the notion of lost opportunities. Given that social workers continue to appear in contemporary film and television texts, the lack of depth of characterisation and storyline, presents social workers as one-dimensional and the issues, challenges and dilemmas they deal with on a day-to-day without a sense of the complexity, ambiguity or uncertainty which is present in contemporary practice.

Conclusion

As we highlighted at the beginning of this article, Annie Hudson, as Chief Executive of The College of Social Work, believes the general public perception of social work can be changed through media, film and television. She argues the 'only way to communicate the complexities of the judgements we make is through stories' (Community Care, 2013, "*College chief: 'Social work is an alien and unknown world for many'*") adding this was an invaluable way for social workers to be able to articulate about the work they do.

Conclusions from this small scale research suggest that practitioners are well aware of their public image; of perceptions of their work and the relationship between representation and its impact on reality (Dyer, 1993; Hall, 1997). This article argues that portrayals of social work through film and television drama, still largely serve to reinforce and encourage a hostile and negative impression of social work as well as endorsing particular neo-liberal ideologies and discourses about social work and welfare. However, current debates the future direction of social work do offer a genuine opportunity to revisit and examine the idea and purpose of social work and we would endorse the challenging ambition the College has set itself in changing public perceptions of social work . It will certainly be interesting to see how the story ends.

Note

This article is the first in a series to be produced by the SWIFT (Social Work in Film and Television) research network. SWIFT is coordinated by David Edmondson and Dr Martin King (Manchester Metropolitan University) and Professor Emilio José Gómez Ciriano (Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha). At the heart of the SWIFT research network is a desire to explore portrayals of social work in film and television as a medium through which to: 'not just to think historically about the past but rather to use that history to rethink the present' (Foucault, 1977, p. 31). You can follow the work of SWIFT on Twitter @socialworkfilm (sign up at: http://twitter.com/socialworkfilm)

Ethics

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